

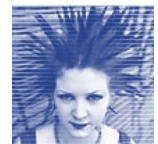


Denmark 2005

**Volker Busch-Geertsema**

## **Preventing and Tackling Homelessness**

Comment Paper, Germany



on behalf of

 European Commission  
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities





## Policy relevance of Danish example

### *The social construction of homelessness: 'people with problems'?*

Danish policies on homelessness are profoundly based on a construction of the homeless population as people who have many more serious problems than that of lacking a 'normal' home. In Germany, in the past, this approach might have caused much more controversy among experts about personal versus structural reasons for homelessness, than nowadays.

With a lasting trend towards decreasing numbers of homeless people, and relaxed housing markets in most German regions since the mid-1990s, it has become clear that those homeless households that were "just in need of appropriate housing" have now got much better opportunities to get access to such housing, and most of those who are still homeless have additional problems.

Nevertheless 'people with problems' (and low income) – be they a history of financial problems, debts and rent arrears, or be they addiction, mental health problems or an obvious need for social support for other reasons – are still confronted with structural barriers hindering access to regular housing. Most housing providers have introduced standard procedures to collect information on the 'debt history' of housing applicants. The stock of social housing and of municipal shares in housing companies has diminished to a great extent, so that the municipalities' main instruments for influencing the allocation of housing in favour of socially marginalised people have been shrinking substantially. Often the demand for reasonably priced, small dwellings for single persons exceeds supply even in areas with vacancies in other sectors of the housing market. Furthermore, in a number of large cities and prosperous regions in Germany the housing markets have been tightened again in recent years and low-income households have considerable difficulty in finding decent housing with appropriate rents (BBR 2004 and Busch-Geertsema et al 2005).

It might be useful to debate whether similar problems of access to regular housing also exist in some areas of Denmark; for example in Copenhagen where – according to the literature available in English – municipal housing has been privatised, and in 1999 demand for social assignment dwellings in Copenhagen exceeded supply by 500 dwellings (Noordgad Fotel / Koch Nielsen 2001, p. 41 ff.).



### *Where do homeless people want to live?*

If we assume that many homeless people have additional problems, other important questions would be: What kind of accommodation do these people prefer? Where do they want to live? Data from different sources in Germany and elsewhere suggest that the overwhelming majority of (mainly single) homeless people 'with problems' (in Germany often defined as persons in need of "support to overcome special social difficulties" according to sections 67-69 of the Act on Social Welfare<sup>1</sup>) want to live in normal, self-contained permanent housing either alone or together with a partner and perhaps children, but certainly with people they can choose themselves. A very low percentage (between two and four percent) want to live for a longer period of their lives in shared dwellings or other types of accommodation where bathrooms, kitchen and other facilities have to be shared. And between five and six percent of homeless single persons stated in different surveys that they wanted to continue their lifestyle or did not want to have a dwelling or any other form of 'traditional' accommodation (Evers/Ruhstrat 1994, p. 241; BAG W 2000, both quoted in Busch-Geertsema 2002a, p. 5-7).

### *Are homeless people 'with problems' able to cope in 'normal' housing?*

But if the majority of homeless people 'with problems' want to live in 'normal' housing, are they also capable of sustaining a permanent tenancy and getting along without too much trouble with neighbours and landlords? In many places in Europe – sometimes also in Germany – we are still confronted with a strong belief that a high proportion of homeless people are not able to live in ordinary dwellings. In almost all European countries – in some more, in others less widely spread – we find a type of debate in which homeless people, and especially the single homeless, are still stigmatised as 'people with an unsettled way of life' or 'incapable tenants' etc.<sup>2</sup>

However, primary research in Germany and other European countries shows that even long-term and severely marginalised homeless people with serious problems may be re-housed successfully into normal self-contained dwellings under certain conditions.

---

1 A new Social Welfare Act was enacted in January 2005 as number XII of the German Social Law (*Sozialgesetzbuch XII*). It has replaced important parts of the former *Bundessozialhilfegesetz*. Section 67-69 of the new Act contains almost exactly the same wording as section 72 of the former Act. For further details on the recent German welfare reform see Busch-Geertsema 2004.

2 For examples see Busch-Geertsema 19987, Sahlin 1996, Dyb 2002, for a recent 'revival' of the debate on "incapable tenants" in Belgium in the 1990s see De Decker/Pannecoucke 2004.



A German government research scheme, “Permanent housing provision for homeless people”, tested and evaluated targeted re-housing projects all over Germany. The long-term results of 11 projects creating 239 tenancies (with 456 persons) in 184 newly built or reconstructed dwellings for homeless people (for single persons as well as for homeless families) showed a very positive outcome in a follow-up study three to six years after their first use.<sup>3</sup> But not all of the tenancies had evolved without problems, by a long way. In more than half of the ongoing tenancies, tenancy problems arose, but could be settled thanks to early intervention by landlords and social workers and also to social support. About half of the tenancy risks were caused exclusively by financial problems (rent arrears) and the other half either by a combination of rent arrears and other problems or by additional problems alone, such as complaints from other tenants about nuisance, non-permitted use of dwellings (subletting, pets, etc), or lack of cleanliness.

Follow-up studies reviewed and undertaken by the EU-funded IMPACT research network (Busch-Geertsema 2002b) equally show encouraging results regarding the successful re-housing of homeless people ‘with problems’ into regular dwellings.<sup>4</sup>

These studies (and some more in other European countries)<sup>5</sup> prove that a great majority of formerly homeless people re-housed by targeted projects were indeed able to sustain their tenancies and use the opportunities they provided for social stabilisation. But the studies also show that regular social services are often not able to provide enough support for re-housed homeless people in crisis situations. The usual type of housing administration is often inadequate. There is a need for quick intervention in the event of tenancy problems and there is an increased risk of such problems occurring. A ‘socially oriented’ housing administration is in many cases a key precondition for the long-term success of

3 Only 15 tenancies (7% of all tenancies) had to be terminated by notice to quit and some of them also by eviction. A further 50 ended by ‘voluntary’ departure, the majority of which lead to other ordinary housing arrangements. More than two-thirds of the tenancies still existed after this relatively long period (BBR 2003).

4 One of the projects included and evaluated by those follow-up studies was a rehousing agency for single people in Hanover (*Soziale Wohnraumhilfe Hannover, SWH*). This organisation acquires most of its housing stock by persuading housing investors to construct or reconstruct new dwellings which are later leased (mostly for 25 years) to the organisation and let with regular rent contracts to persons from the target group. Less than 20% of almost 200 tenancies in 15 different projects had ended with a clear negative outcome (notice to quit, eviction, abandonment) over a period of almost ten years (Busch-Geertsema 2002c and 2005).

5 See as another example the results of the Rough Sleepers Initiative in the UK (Dane 1998 and Randall/Brown 1999).



re-housing. Targeted support measures for stimulating and stabilising the re-integration process have proved necessary not only for the transition from being homeless to being a tenant and for the first phase after moving into the dwellings, but in a substantial number of cases also for a longer period thereafter. A significant proportion of tenants remained vulnerable to crisis situations, because of limiting objective conditions as well as because of restricted subjective coping abilities. Often it was possible to put an end to homelessness but not to poverty, unemployment and remaining health problems. Relative integration and relative autonomy must be seen as a realistic and worthy goal for some of the homeless people. But one should not underestimate the importance of the 'housing factor': The integration into normal, self-contained housing with a long-term perspective as regular tenants had an important impact in the sense that it helped people to acquire normality, stability, a private sphere and (relative) autonomy.

#### *German experiences with 'estates for the homeless'*

The positive experiences of integrating homeless people into normal housing contrast with the negative experiences of 'estates for the homeless' in Germany over past decades. In the 1950s, 1960s and up to the 1970s, special estates for the temporary accommodation of homeless families (and for some of the single homeless as well) were constructed in many German municipalities, usually on the margins of cities or near railway tracks or refuse dumps etc., and deliberately designed with low standards, e.g. without inside bathrooms, showers or toilets, without central heating etc. Some of them were very simple, one-storey houses, some were multi-storey blocks, others just barrack-like buildings. These estates – exclusively used for 'temporary accommodation' that very often turned out to be long-term, but without a rent contract and tenancy rights – were soon stigmatized as 'bad addresses' and 'social boiling points'. It was difficult for inhabitants to get out, to find work, or even for the children to manage at school with the stigma of coming from 'there'. More recently, these estates have been redeveloped into regular housing in many localities, with much effort and considerable financial input, and almost nobody in Germany wants to go back to start such an experience again.

#### *Integration in regular housing as an important goal of homelessness policy*

These positive and negative experiences have probably influenced a statement by German government in a report on homelessness to the Parliament, that "*in*



*principle, a provision with 'normal housing' has to be the aim, meaning housing with usual standards in intact neighbourhoods. Spatial and social exclusion do not serve integration but make effective support more difficult. Accommodation in shelters and other special forms of housing or a concentration of disadvantaged households in poor housing areas may rather increase social problems than solve them. Moreover, such forms of housing are in most cases especially expensive.'* (Deutscher Bundestag 1998, p.2)

For examples of related policy: Since 1999 the Federal Government and *Länder* have supplemented urban construction promotion with the new programme "Neighbourhoods with a Special Need for Development – the Social City". Other *Länder*-examples can be found in the Germany National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2003-2005.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Potentials and risks of the Danish approach*

On the other hand, it is a well known fact that regular housing will not be the appropriate solution for everybody and that even if conditions for access to housing and support in housing are brought to an optimum (and there remains quite some way to achieve this goal),<sup>7</sup> there will remain a small minority of homeless people who are not willing or are not capable of living in a conventional dwelling in a multi-storey block. Even social rental agencies founded by service providers for the homeless select tenants, and exclude some who are judged as very difficult to handle. In recommendations of the national alliance of such service providers (*BAG Wohnungslosenhilfe 2000*) "unusual behaviour" and neighbourhood nuisances are mentioned as a problem and "niche solutions" are recommended.

Furthermore, in many places in Germany, 'unusual' types of accommodation (trailer camps, permanent use of garden allotments and holiday houses, self-built homes etc.) exist,<sup>8</sup> which are comparable to those that inspired the former Danish Ministry of Construction and Housing to start the programme *skæve*

---

6 See project 12 "Securing Housing and Access to affordable Housing", developed by the Land Berlin and project 24, the *Länder* Programme "Preventing Homelessness – Safeguarding Permanent", developed by the Land North Rhine-Westphalia. (Federal Ministry of Health and Social Security 2004).

7 The results of a nation-wide study on support in housing for (formerly) homeless people funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research and recommendations for their improvement have been published in Busch-Geertsema/Evers 2004.

8 Just by way of example. At the time of writing there were ten different trailer camps in Berlin, eight of which were tolerated and had achieved leases with land-owners, while two others were under imminent threat of removal (information by Senate of Berlin). The *Frankfurter Rundschau* from 14.4.2005 reports the plans of the Munich authorities to clear a trailer camp of 26 formerly homeless persons.



*huse til skæve eksistenser* which was later continued under the present Danish Government.

The approach was already presented as an interesting and innovative example of tackling homelessness in a study on homelessness policies in other EU countries on behalf of the German Housing Ministry (Busch-Geertsema 2001).<sup>9</sup> As is mentioned in the discussion paper for this peer review, the author of the German study emphasised the importance of the Danish approach to tolerating existing areas where such atypical forms of housing have developed in a grass-roots, unplanned way. He assumes that in Germany the social potential of such forms of accommodation for people who would otherwise be homeless and difficult to reintegrate is equally important, and he recommends that policies of tolerating and stabilising such areas instead of clearing them up or keeping them under constant threat of removal, make sense, even if the accommodation was originally not meant for permanent habitation and building regulations and other regulations might have been violated. While he recommends tolerating such forms of bottom-up self-help strategies already in existence, he is more sceptical about strategies to plan the unplanned and to initiate (and regulate) the unregulated from a top-down angle (as in a governmental programme). Positive aspects of some of the *skæve huse* projects compared with traditional institutions for the homeless are the greater degree of privacy, autonomy and security to stay (unlimited tenancies) that they allow. Some of them promote a high degree of user involvement even in constructing parts of the house and in managing the surrounding area. The potential risks are that this form of housing is offered to people who do not want to live in it and that the approach develops into a form of spatial and social exclusion of people who are categorised by others as incapable of living in normal dwellings.<sup>10</sup> Some other risks, from a 'bad address' and low integration opportunities, have already been mentioned.

For a very limited number of older and severely marginalised homeless people with health problems and often a history of hospitalisation, small institutions are an appropriate solution, which provide a more communal and supervised structure, where residents can live permanently, take part in communal activities and transform their rooms into a 'home'.<sup>11</sup> They may already be found in a number of German cities, but sometimes they have to struggle with problems

---

9 It is also mentioned in another study on "Targeted Promotion of Rental Housing for Disadvantaged Groups" funded by the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning (ARGE Kirchhoff / Jakobs 2004)

10 The ambivalence of "surviving strategies" in unusual types of accommodation, which can be found in a number of countries – including Germany -, is discussed in Edgar/Doherty/Meert 2002, chapter 5, p. 88-96.

11 Such projects are discussed as "*safe havens*" in the United States and Canada, but were also promoted as innovative approaches by other countries in Europe. For an example in the UK see Aldridge 1997.



to finance long-term support. Common features include a lack of excessive demands on the inhabitants, consistency, easy accessibility, continuity, flexibility, and individual attendance.

It has to be emphasised, that the fact that a minority of homeless people prefer or need special types of housing must not lead to an interpretation of homeless people as a group of '*second-class people*' which should be provided with '*second-class housing*'. As already mentioned in the discussion paper, research in Sweden has shown the problems and exclusionary effects connected with a '*secondary housing market*' and rigid staircase systems that are still seen as models of best practice not only in Sweden but in many other European countries (including some approaches in Germany) as well. (See also Sahlin 2002 for recent case studies by other researchers in different Swedish cities reinforcing her criticism with new empirical evidence).

User involvement and self-organisation of homeless people are important aspects of Danish homeless policy that are underdeveloped in Germany. It should be acknowledged that such self-organisation needs public support (money and attendance). Central, regional, and local government in Germany could learn from the Danish example<sup>12</sup> and provide more support for such initiatives. The potential for, as well as limits on user involvement in developing the quality of services for the homeless have recently been discussed by Inger Koch-Nielsen (2003; including some of the few existing examples in Germany). The support and contact persons scheme appears (from the very limited information available) as a scheme that could also have an innovative and significant impact in strengthening service users' positions.

## Transferability

For transferability of *skæve huse* see Annex 2 (p. 36f.) of the discussion paper. Germany might lack the typical Danish spirit of compromise and the cultural history of tolerance of deviations from the norm, but the fact that existing areas of unusual accommodation are tolerated in many municipalities already shows that this is possible as well in Germany. Nevertheless the legal position of inhabitants of such housing is extremely weak and recent court decisions

---

12 More information about the Council for the Socially Exposed is to be found in Koch-Nielsen 2004, p. 6 f. and at [www.udsatte.dk](http://www.udsatte.dk)



emphasise the illegal character of accommodation that is permanently occupied, but used without adequate permission according to planning regulations. Experts recommend the introduction of a clause in the planning laws that would open scope for experiments with alternative forms of housing (Bieback 2004).

More support for the autonomy of homeless people and a comparable scheme of support and contact persons in order to strengthen users' rights and their involvement in the provision of services seems to be relatively easy to transfer to Germany, but of course they would require political decisions to provide adequate funding. A typical problem in Germany would be to clarify responsibilities at the different levels of local, regional and national government.

Financing of long-term support in regular housing as well as in more institutional types of accommodation has been mentioned as a continuous problem in recent research. Experts have called for new legal provisions in order to finance long-term housing assistance (Forschungsverbund 2005, p. 138/139).

### **Important questions**

The most important questions are listed in the discussion paper already. It would be helpful to learn more about the evaluation results concerning the *skæve huse* programme, about the fluctuation in this type of housing, the handling of regulations and the development of communal life in *skæve huse* settlements, the opportunities for and the development of individual preferences for moving into more regular types of housing, the type and intensity of social support, the terms of tenancies, neighbourhood reactions etc. A very specific question concerns data protection and ethical issues, when details of the inhabitants of such housing projects are published (as in one of the peer review documents).

It would also be interesting to get more information about the details of the support and contact persons scheme, concerning the type of financing, qualification of support staff, organisational structure, time available per client, time-span of support etc.



## References

- Aldridge, Robert (1997) *Meeting the needs of homeless people with multiple problems*, UK national report 1997. European Observatory on Homelessness, Edinburgh/Brussels (FEANTSA)
- ARGE Kirchhoff/Jacobs (2004) *Zielgerichtete Mietwohnraumförderung für benachteiligte Gruppen*, Hamburg (Ts.)
- BAG W, Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Wohnungslosenhilfe (2000a) *Statistikbericht der BAG Wohnungslosenhilfe 1997-1998*, Bielefeld (BAG W)
- BAG W, Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Wohnungslosenhilfe (2000b) *„Wohnunfähigkeit“? – „Störer“? – „Problemhaushalte“? Soziale Ausgrenzung schwervermittelbarer Wohnungsnotfälle aus der Versorgung mit Wohnungen und Strategien zu ihrer Überwindung*. Positionspapier der BAG W, erarbeitet vom FA Wohnen, verabschiedet vom Gesamtvorstand auf seiner Sitzung vom 23./24.10.2000
- BBR, Bundesamt für Bauwesen und Raumordnung (ed.; 2003) *Dauerhafte Wohnungsversorgung von Obdachlosen*, Werkstatt: Praxis Nr. 3/2003 (authors: G. Schuler-Wallner/I. Mühlich-Klinger), Bonn: BBR Selbstverlag
- BBR, Bundesamt für Bauwesen und Raumordnung (ed.; 2004) *Wohnungsmärkte in Deutschland. Ausgabe 2004* (Berichte, Band 18), Bonn: BBR Selbstverlag
- Bieback, Karin (2004) Jede Wagenburg ein „städtebaulicher Misstand“? Die Rechtsprechung des OVG Berlin zur bauplanungsrechtlichen Unzulässigkeit von Bauwagenplätzen, in: *Forum Recht* 04/2004, S. 130-132
- Busch-Geertsema, Volker (1987) Wohnungslosigkeit als Charakterschwäche, in: Autorengruppe (ed.): *Wie Armut entsteht und Armutsverhalten hergestellt wird*, Bremen: Selbstverlag, p. 11– 52
- Busch-Geertsema, Volker (2001) *Wohnungslosenspolitik in anderen EU-Ländern. Übertragbarkeit von Konzepten und Maßnahmen auf Deutschland*. Study on behalf of the German Federal Ministry of Transport, Building, and Housing represented by the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning. Bielefeld: VSH Verlag Soziale Hilfe
- Busch-Geertsema, Volker (2002a) When homeless people are allowed to decide by themselves. Re-housing homeless people in Germany, in: *European Journal of Social Work*, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 5 - 19
- Busch-Geertsema, Volker (2002b): *Does re-housing lead to reintegration? Follow-up studies on re-housed homeless people*. Working paper for EU-funded IMPACT project, Bremen (GISS), download from: <http://www.iccr-international.org/impact/downloads.html>



- Busch-Geertsema, Volker (2002c) *Re-housing homeless people. The case of Soziale Wohnraumhilfe Hannover. A basic analytical evaluation and a follow-up-study of tenants and ex-tenants*. Working paper for EU-funded IMPACT project, Bremen (GISS), download from: <http://www.iccr-international.org/impact/downloads.html>;
- Busch-Geertsema, Volker (2004) Germany, the Changing Role of the State in Housing and Social Policy, in: *European Journal of Housing Policy*, Volume 4, Number 3, December 2004, p. 303 – 321
- Busch-Geertsema, Volker (2005) *Från härbärge till egen bostad - uppföljning av projekt H13 i Hannover sju år senar*, Malmö: Egalité (forthcoming)
- Busch-Geertsema, Volker / Evers, Jürgen (2004) *Auf dem Weg zur Normalität. Bestandsaufnahme der persönlichen Hilfen in Wohnungen im Bereich der Hilfen in Wohnungsnotfällen*. Bremen (GISS), download from [www.giss-ev.de](http://www.giss-ev.de) or [www.forschungsverbund-wohnungsnotfaelle.de](http://www.forschungsverbund-wohnungsnotfaelle.de).
- Busch-Geertsema, Volker / Evers, Jürgen / Ruhstrat, Ekke-Ulf (2005) *Grundlagen für eine Politik zur Verbesserung des „Hilfesystems“ in Wohnungsnotfällen. Kurzfassung der Ergebnisse und Empfehlungen der Hilfesystemforschung im Forschungsverbund „Wohnungslosigkeit und Hilfen in Wohnungsnotfällen“*, Bremen (GISS), March 2005, download from: <http://www.forschungsverbund-wohnungsnotfaelle.de> or <http://www.giss-ev.de>
- Dane, Katherine (1998) *Making it last: Report into tenancy outcomes for rough sleepers*, London (Housing Services Agency)
- De Decker, Pascal / Pannecoucke, Isabelle (2004) Bad news for satisfied tenants: On the social construction of social rented housing as dreadful enclosures, in *Éthique et économique/Ethics and Economics*, 2 (1), 2004, p. 1-22
- Deutscher Bundestag (1998) *Bericht der Bundesregierung über Maßnahmen zur Bekämpfung der Obdachlosigkeit*, Bundestagsdrucksache 13/10141
- Dyb, Evelyn (2002) *Homelessness in Norway – Explanations for marginalisation*, (Norwegian Building Research Institute, note 54), Oslo 2002
- Edgar, Bill/Doherty, Joe/Meert, Henk (2002) *Access to Housing: Homelessness and Vulnerable Groups in Europe*, London: Policy Press
- Evers, J./Ruhstrat, E.-U. (1994) *Wohnungsnotfälle in Schleswig-Holstein. Im Spannungsfeld zwischen Sozial-, Ordnungs- und Wohnungspolitik* (ed. by Ministerin für Arbeit, Soziales, Jugend und Gesundheit des Landes Schleswig-Holstein), Kiel
- Federal Ministry of Health and Social Security 2004: *Strategies to Enhance Social Integration, National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003 .2005, Update 2004*, Bonn



- Forschungsverbund Wohnungslosigkeit und Hilfen in Wohnungsnotfällen (2005) *Gesamtbericht* (Entwurf), Bremen (GISS), Darmstadt (IWU), Frankfurt (GSF e.V.), download from:  
<http://www.forschungsverbund-wohnungsnotfaelle.de>
- Koch-Nielsen, Inger (2003) *Quality Assurance in Social Public Services – and their possible application in services for homeless people*. Working paper for Impact Project, Copenhagen (SFI), download from: <http://www.iccr-international.org/impact/downloads.html>
- Koch-Nielsen, Inger (2004) *Danish National Report for the European Observatory on Homelessness, Policy Update*, Copenhagen (SFI)/Brussels (FEANTSA)
- Nordgaard Fotel, Trine / Koch-Nielsen, Inger (2001) *Danish National Report for FEANTSA . Access to Housing for Low Income Groups 2000-2001*, European Observatory on Homelessness, Copenhagen (SFI)/Brussels (FEANTSA)
- Randall, Geoffrey / Brown, Susan (1999) *Homes for Street Homeless People. An evaluation of the Rough Sleepers Initiative*, London (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions)
- Sahlin, Ingrid (1996) From Deficient Planning to “Incapable Tenants”. Changing Discourses on Housing Problems in Sweden, in: *Scandinavian Housing & Planning Research* 13, pp. 167-181
- Sahlin, Ingrid (1998) *The staircase of transition*, National Report from Sweden, European Observatory on Homelessness 1997, Lund/Brussels (FEANTSA)
- Sahlin (2002) *Review of Homelessness Research in Sweden*, European Observatory on Homelessness 2002, Gothenburg/Brussels (FEANTSA)